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From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages

By Michael D. Bailey

By the time the fires of the great European witch-hunts burned out in the seventeenth century, untold thousands had been sent to their deaths upon conviction of this terrible crime. Exact figures are understandably difficult to come by, but the best available estimates set the number of the dead near sixty thousand, and this just for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the witch craze reached its peak in western Europe.¹ The first sparks of this conflagration appeared much earlier, although not as early as might perhaps be expected. The fully developed concept of witchcraft that held force throughout the years of the great European witch-hunts appeared only in the early fifteenth century, emerging from trials for heresy and sorcery conducted mainly in the high valleys of the western Alps and codified in a number of learned treatises beginning in the 1430s.² This new concept was rooted, to be sure, in far older ideas of maleficent magic common in western European culture, and indeed, it would seem, in most premodern human cultures since their earliest development.³ In Christian culture, moreover, such sorcery had

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¹ See Brian Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (London, 1995), p. 21; also Wolfgang Behringer, ed., *Hexen und Hexenprozesse*, 3rd ed. (Munich, 1995), p. 194.

² On the development of the witch stereotype at this time and in these lands, see Andreas Blauert, *Frühe Hexenverfolgungen: Ketzer-, Zauberei- und Hexenprozesse des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Sozialgeschichtliche Bibliothek bei Junius 5 (Hamburg, 1989); Arno Borst, "The Origins of the Witch-Craze in the Alps," in idem, *Medieval Worlds: Barbarians, Heretics, and Artists in the Middle Ages*, trans. Eric Hansen (Chicago, 1992), pp. 101–22; Bernard Andenmatten and Kathrin Utz Tremp, "De l'hérésie à la sorcellerie: L'inquisiteur Ulric de Torrenté OP (vers 1420–1445) et l'affirmissement de l'inquisition en Suisse romande," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique suisse* 86 (1992), 69–119; Pierrette Paravy, *De la Chrétienté romaine à la Réforme en Dauphiné: Evêques, fidèles et déviants (vers 1340–vers 1530)*, 2 vols., Collection de l'Ecole française de Rome 183 (Rome, 1993), 2:771–905; Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, Kathrin Utz Tremp, and Martine Ostorero, "Le sabbat dans les Alps: Les prémices médiévales de la chasse aux sorcières," in *Sciences: Raison et déraison* (Lausanne, 1994), pp. 67–89; and Martine Ostorero, *Folâtrer avec les démons: Sabbat et chasse aux sorciers à Vevey (1448)*, Cahiers Lausannois d'Histoire Médiévale 15 (Lausanne, 1995). On the early sources describing witchcraft, best now is Martine Ostorero, Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, and Kathrin Utz Tremp, eds., *L'imaginaire du sabbat: Edition critique des textes les plus anciens (1430 c.–1440 c.)*, Cahiers Lausannois d'Histoire Médiévale 26 (Lausanne, 1999).

³ E.g., Tzvi Abusch, "The Demonic Image of the Witch in Standard Babylonian Literature: The Reworking of Popular Conceptions by Learned Exorcists," in *Religion, Science, and Magic in Concert and in Conflict*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher (New York, 1989), pp. 27–58. Abusch notes a process of demonization of popular images of witches by learned authorities that bears striking resemblance to later occurrences in western Europe (p. 39).

always been linked, at least in the minds of clerical authorities, to demonic agency, and thus resolutely condemned.⁴ Despite such long-standing and deeply rooted concerns, however, only toward the end of the Middle Ages did the critical transformation of simple sorcery into the far darker crime of witchcraft begin to occur. Over the course of roughly one hundred years, from the early fourteenth century to the early fifteenth, heightened clerical concern over harmful sorcery and changing understandings of how magic operated combined with other factors to push authorities slowly but inexorably into accepting, defining, and promulgating the full horrors of witchcraft.

That the idea of witchcraft emerged in the later Middle Ages out of earlier medieval conceptions of magic and concerns over magical practices is well known and widely accepted.⁵ What I shall undertake here is to trace more thoroughly the changing understandings of magic and magical operations that underlay the eventual concept of witchcraft, as evinced in a series of documents, decrees, and treatises written by clerical authorities. In taking this more intellectual approach to understanding the rise of witchcraft, rather than a social or institutional one, I am informed by Stuart Clark's recent magisterial study of ideas of witchcraft and demonology in the early modern period.⁶ Whereas Clark seeks to link the fully developed concept of witchcraft to other aspects of contemporary European thought, and deliberately avoids any discussion of the rise or decline of the witch phenomenon, I intend to examine the process whereby that concept first emerged out of earlier concerns over sorcery and explore how the dynamics of that process helped shape the nature of the subsequent idea of witchcraft.

To discuss medieval sorcery and witchcraft as two separate things, the one emerging out of, yet distinct from, the other, is to some extent to play a game of words, or rather, a game of a single word: the Latin *maleficium*. In its origin this word literally meant only an evil or harmful deed, by implication one performed through magic. Practitioners of harmful sorcery have presented a problem, both socially and legally, to all societies that have ever believed in the real efficacy of magical acts. Thus arose the biblical injunction of Exod. 22.18, famously rendered in the King James Version as "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Thus also

⁴ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989), pp. 38–40.

⁵ The process was largely described in Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (New York, 1975), slightly revised and reprinted as *Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (London, 1993; all subsequent citations are to this revised edition); Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (Berkeley, Calif., 1976); and Edward Peters, *The Magician, the Witch, and the Law* (Philadelphia, 1978). In stressing the connection between witchcraft and earlier traditions of magic, all three were to some extent reacting against Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1972), which argued that witchcraft was essentially an outgrowth of medieval heresy. An alternative view stressing the links between witchcraft and elements of popular folklore and archaic shamanistic practices among the European peasantry is most closely associated with Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York, 1991). I have addressed Ginzburg's approach, and my reaction to it, more fully in an earlier article, "The Medieval Concept of the Witches' Sabbath," *Exemplaria* 8 (1996), 419–39, esp. pp. 424–26.

⁶ Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997).

might such classical figures as the beautiful but dangerous Circe and Medea, or the hag Erichtho, be described as “witches.”⁷ Yet during the years of the great European witch-hunts, the term *malefica* carried a far more specific and far more sinister meaning than just a person accused of working harmful sorcery against others. Witches were certainly believed to perform magic with the aid of demons, indeed via the supplication and worship of demons. But worse even than that, they were accused of complete apostasy, of rejecting their faith and surrendering their souls to Satan himself in exchange for their dark powers. They were thus thought to be members of an organized cult headed by the Prince of Darkness and standing in opposition to God’s church on earth. At regular nocturnal gatherings known as sabbaths,⁸ they would assemble in the presence of their demonic master, worship him, and, in exchange for his promise of magical power, forswear Christ, the church, and the entire Christian faith. They would also murder and devour babies, engage in sexual orgies, and perform other sinful and abominable rites.⁹

For the purposes of this article, and for the sake of brevity and clarity at the cost of some linguistic anachronism, I will apply the term “sorcery” only to the former condition, the simple performance of harmful magic, while only the latter, fully developed stereotype will I designate as “witchcraft.” Although throughout the Middle Ages sorcery was generally regarded as suspicious at best, and often criminal, only the development of the idea of witchcraft made possible the widespread anxiety and the sheer number of executions for this crime that took place during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The charge of apostasy, which was unforgivable, and the assumed membership in a conspiratorial sect, which made multiple accusations arising from a single prosecution almost inevitable, were the engines that drove the great witch-hunts of Europe.¹⁰ While for the most part early-modern witch trials were conducted by secular authorities, the mentality behind them was ecclesiastical and inquisitorial,¹¹ and clerics played a major role, although by no means an exclusive one, in shaping the concept of witchcraft.

The rise of witchcraft in the later Middle Ages is interesting and important not just for the suffering that it caused, and the terrible intolerance and persecution

⁷ See Georg Luck, “Witches and Sorcerers in Classical Literature,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia, 1999), pp. 91–158, esp. pp. 110–13 and 137–38 for the particular women mentioned here. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 33, notes such literature first established the later standard depiction of the female witch as either a young seductress or an old hag.

⁸ The term begins to appear in the second half of the fifteenth century. Earlier, these gatherings were generally called “synagogues.” See Paravicini Bagliani, Utz Tremp, and Ostorero, “Le sabbat dans les Alpes,” p. 70; Ostorero, *Folâtrer*, pp. 143–44; and Paravy, *De la Chrétienté romaine*, 2:895.

⁹ For standard characteristics of sabbaths, see Bailey, “Witches’ Sabbath,” esp. pp. 438–39.

¹⁰ See Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, pp. 172–74, on the dynamics by which hunts began. Best on such dynamics, both for how hunts began and how they ended, remains H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany, 1562–1684: The Social and Intellectual Foundations* (Stanford, Calif., 1972).

¹¹ On secular legal reforms supporting witch trials, see Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, pp. 68–99. On the reintroduction of classical techniques of torture in Western legal practices, see Edward Peters, *Torture*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, 1996), pp. 40–73.

for which it became a byword, but because the development of the idea of the witch represents an important turning point in the history of magic in Europe. Too often dismissed (indeed even by many medieval authorities) as unchanging “superstitious” belief, magic was an important and vital aspect of many areas of medieval culture.¹² Shifting conceptions of sorcery, beginning in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries and culminating in the notion of witchcraft in the early fifteenth century, created subtle but significant changes in many basic elements of magic—what sort of person could interact with and manipulate supernatural forces, how such manipulation was possible, what the motivating factors and goals of such manipulation might be, and, most basically, what the nature of the relationship between human magician and the supernatural power he or she manipulated was. The overall effect of these changes, I would contend, represents a more profound shift in conceptions of magic than any that had occurred since Christian cosmology had been overlaid onto pagan magical systems in late antiquity. By tracing the transformation of sorcery into witchcraft in the later Middle Ages, this article will explore the roots of these important developments and the intellectual foundations on which they rested.

In order to set in perspective the nature of the change that clerical conceptions of magic underwent in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, it is necessary first to go back to the very beginnings of the Christian era. In the ancient Mediterranean world, while ideas about magic were highly complex and nuanced, the official stance, that is, the legal stance on magical practices, was fairly straightforward. Magic was seen as a morally neutral act that an individual could employ toward either beneficial or harmful ends. The Greco-Roman world condemned only harmful sorcery as illegal.¹³ As Rome became increasingly Christian, however, an important change took place. Classical *daimones*, supernatural spirits upon whom magicians often called to perform acts of sorcery, were gradually transformed into Christian demons.¹⁴ While *daimones* could be hostile to humanity, they were not necessarily so, often being merely ambivalent spirits, while demons were completely evil, the legions of Satan arrayed for battle against the church and all Christian society. Thus early Christian authorities quickly moved to condemn any magic, regardless of apparent effect, that might involve trafficking with demons. In short, the classical world’s social objection to the harmful consequences of sorcery became the Christian world’s moral and theological objection to the very nature of much magical activity.¹⁵

Yet this new Christian conception of magic as operating often, although by no means always, via demonic agency produced an interesting effect on authorities’

¹² Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 1–2. See also the foreword to the new Canto edition of this book (Cambridge, Eng., 2000), which discusses the idea of magic in history and the history of magic (pp. ix–x).

¹³ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 37; Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches*, trans. O. N. V. Glendinning (Chicago, 1964), pp. 18–19.

¹⁴ See Valerie Flint, “The Demonisation of Magic and Sorcery in Late Antiquity: Christian Redefinitions of Pagan Religions,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, ed. Ankarloo and Clark (see above, n. 7), pp. 277–348.

¹⁵ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 37.

view of the human practitioners of magic. In the late-antique world, as Peter Brown has aptly noted, “the human agent is pushed into a corner by the demon-host.”¹⁶ That is, compared with the malevolence of Satan and his demonic legions, in whom Christian society saw its prime enemies, the human sorcerer involved in the performance of socially harmful *maleficium* hardly seemed important. The demon, and ultimately Satan, was the real author of the evil involved.¹⁷ This de-emphasis on the human agency in sorcery helps to explain the medieval church’s centuries-long ambivalence, verging at times on outright uninterest, in persecuting practitioners of such magic.¹⁸ Throughout the early Middle Ages, sorcerers were often depicted, not as powerful agents of evil in their own right, but as unfortunate victims of the deceptions and temptations of the devil, and thus the church reacted to them with correction and penance rather than with calls for severe persecution.¹⁹

By the thirteenth century, however, clerical authorities began to take magic, and magicians, far more seriously.²⁰ One main factor behind this shift was the rise of various types of learned magic, including astronomy, alchemy, and spiritual and demonic magic, among the educated elites of western Europe. Grounded in Arab, Greek, and Jewish texts, such magic became the focus of much interest among the scholars and intellectuals of Europe.²¹ While some were fascinated, many others

¹⁶ Brown, “Sorcery, Demons and the Rise of Christianity: From Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages,” in idem, *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine* (London, 1972), pp. 119–46, here p. 132.

¹⁷ Brown, “Sorcery,” p. 137.

¹⁸ For a general account of both the acceptance and the condemnation of certain aspects of magic, including social, cultural, and institutional factors, as well as intellectual ones, see Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, N.J., 1991). An important comment on Flint’s argument is Richard Kieckhefer, “The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic,” *American Historical Review* 99 (1994), 813–36.

¹⁹ On the relatively lighter Christian legal penalties for magic based on the idea of the magician as “victim,” as compared with those in late-antique imperial codes, see Flint, “Demonisation of Magic,” pp. 322–24. Flint also discusses the derision and “discrediting” of magicians by Christian authorities, although in a very different sense, in *Rise of Magic*, pp. 331–54. Early-medieval secular authorities, following Germanic legal traditions, generally continued to punish sorcery as a serious crime, but more for its supposed harmful effects than its morally negative status: Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 179.

²⁰ This rise in “serious” consideration of magic after 1200 is paralleled by a sharp increase in treatment of the “marvelous” and “monstrous” during the same period. On this development, see Caroline Walker Bynum, “Wonder,” *American Historical Review* 102 (1997), 1–16; eadem, “Metamorphosis, or Gerald and the Werewolf,” *Speculum* 73 (1998), 987–1013; and eadem, “Miracles and Marvels: The Limits of Alterity,” in *Vita religiosa im Mittelalter: Festschrift für Kaspar Elm zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Franz J. Felten and Nikolas Jaspert, *Berliner historische Studien* 31, *Ordensstudien* 13 (Berlin, 1999), pp. 799–817. Especially in this latest article, Bynum focuses on how intellectuals worked to rationalize (or “flatten”) the wondrous into the natural order of the world as they understood it, which was precisely what authorities also sought to do with magic. Bynum herself touches on the parallel when she briefly notes “a compulsion among university intellectuals [after 1200] to treat topics such as magic and the bodies of demons” (Bynum, “Metamorphosis,” pp. 992–93).

²¹ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 116–44; Peters, *Magician*, pp. 85–98. Of use for some more specific points is Charles Burnett, “Talismans: Magic as Science? Necromancy among the Seven Liberal Arts,” in idem, *Magic and Divination in the Middle Ages: Texts and Techniques in the Islamic and Christian Worlds* (Aldershot, Eng., 1996), pp. 1–15. See also Russell, *Witchcraft* (see above, n. 5), pp. 142–47; and Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984), esp. pp. 159–207.

greatly feared this new learning. The church remained convinced that demonic power lay hidden at the root of even apparently innocent magical practices. Even worse, the darkest aspect of magic, involving explicit demonic invocation, often proved the most seductive to young scholars, giving rise to what one expert has termed a “clerical underworld” of “necromancy,” as such learned demonic magic was generally termed.²² Scholars of medieval magic have long noted how the rise of necromancy fed increased ecclesiastical concerns over sorcery, and especially the demonic nature of sorcery, culminating in the idea of witchcraft in the early fifteenth century.²³ I agree, but I would contend that witchcraft represents not just a new level of concern over demonic sorcery, but a subtle yet significant shift in basic conceptions of how such magic operated. Although witchcraft grew out of sorcery, witches were not just sorcerers with a few diabolical flourishes added on. The nature of their power and of their interaction with demonic forces was different, and more sinister, than that entailed by any earlier notions even of demonic sorcery.

My argument is that the emergence of this new conception of condemned magical practice was driven, to a large extent, by the unwitting conflation, in clerical minds, of two very different magical systems. By the end of the thirteenth century, clerical authorities were generally familiar with the essentially elite system of necromancy. But there also existed in western Christendom a widespread and diffuse system of common spells, charms, blessings, potions, powders, and talismans employed by many people at all levels of medieval society, including, it should be noted, many clerics.²⁴ The church had always feared that secret demonic agency might lie behind the various devices of this common tradition, and there seems no reason to doubt that most people in medieval Europe shared this general belief, since the church told them to do so.²⁵ But even clerics could be caught in uncertainty about the exact nature of specific magical acts,²⁶ and most common people seem to have thought little about such matters, focusing their attention on the outcome, not the operations, of common sorcery.²⁷ On the other hand, learned

²² Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 151–56. The Latin *necromantia*, meaning technically only divination via the dead, and *nigromantia*, meaning the black arts more generally conceived, were used interchangeably in the Middle Ages to mean demonic magic: Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (University Park, Pa., 1998), p. 4 and p. 19 n. 14.

²³ Mainly Cohn, Kieckhefer, and Peters (see above, n. 5).

²⁴ On this “common tradition” of medieval magic, see Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 56–94.

²⁵ Kieckhefer, “Specific Rationality,” esp. p. 833.

²⁶ Witness the interesting case of the Augustinian friar Werner of Friedberg, who was put on trial in Heidelberg in 1405 for, among other things, making use of supposedly superstitious blessings and charms: Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 186. A fuller account may be found in Robert E. Lerner, “Werner di Friedberg intrappolato dalla legge,” in *La parola all'accusato*, ed. Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, Prisma 139 (Palermo, 1991), pp. 268–81.

²⁷ The most recent studies of late-medieval witchcraft accusations and trials, Ostorero, *Folâtrer* (see above, n. 2), esp. pp. 18–32; Eva Maier, *Trente ans avec le diable: Une nouvelle chasse aux sorciers sur la Riviera lémanique (1477–1484)*, Cahiers Lausannois d'Histoire Médiévale 17 (Lausanne, 1996), esp. pp. 143–64; Sandrine Strobino, *Françoise sauvée des flammes? Une valaisanne accusée de sorcellerie au XVe siècle*, Cahiers Lausannois d'Histoire Médiévale 18 (Lausanne, 1996), esp. pp. 73–82;

demonic sorcery was a highly structured variety of magic limited to a small clerical elite. Necromancy operated through very complex and detailed invocations of demons, sometimes lasting for days. These summoning formulae, often derived from Arabic or Hebrew magical systems and usually based to some extent on church rituals, were laid out and transmitted in books of spells written, of course, in Latin.²⁸ Thus only the clerical elite, with the prerequisite ritual training and Latin literacy, could perform such magic. Indeed, only educated clerics could conceive of such magic.

Critically, once this system had become established in the later Middle Ages, the idea that sorcery might be performed by means *other* than complex necromantic ritual seems not to have figured significantly in clerical thought. The need to harmonize learned theories of magic with far more widespread common practices is evident in many clerical writings on the subject, although only in an ironic sense, since clerical authorities never recognized that they were dealing with two different and highly divergent systems. This conviction, and the need to fit common magical practices into the intellectual framework established by learned necromancy, laid the foundation for the eventual construction of the concept of witchcraft.

The confusion between these two magical traditions, and the slow and unconscious conflation of elite and common practice, becomes evident in the early fourteenth century, during the pontificate of John XXII. His reign was marked by a deep and growing concern over sorcery at the highest levels of the ecclesiastical structure. Throughout this period the papal court, and particularly the pope himself, was beset by fears of demonic sorcery and magical plots.²⁹ Reflecting this atmosphere of heightened anxiety, in 1320 William, cardinal of Santa Sabina, wrote from the papal seat at Avignon to the nearby inquisitors of southern France at Toulouse and Carcassonne, ordering them, in the name of the pope, to take action again any sorcerers who engaged in demonic invocation, binding themselves to demons “in order to perpetrate whatever kind of sorcery.”³⁰ Six years later, Pope John issued the decree *Super illius specula*, condemning all sorcerers who “enter an alliance with death and make a pact with hell, for they sacrifice to

and Laurence Pfister, *L'enfer sur terre: Sorcellerie à Dommartin (1498)*, Cahiers Lausannois d'Histoire Médiévale 20 (Lausanne, 1997), esp. pp. 155–72, have generally confirmed the earlier argument of Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, pp. 47–92, in this regard.

²⁸ On the formulae and systems of learned necromancy, best is Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*. Also useful for elite magical practices generally are the articles collected in *Conjuring Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic*, ed. Claire Fanger (University Park, Pa., 1998); and the classic account in E. M. Butler, *Ritual Magic* (1949; repr. University Park, Pa., 1998), esp. pp. 47–99.

²⁹ Russell, *Witchcraft*, pp. 169–73; Peters, *Magician*, pp. 130–32; and Anneliese Maier, “Eine Verfügung Johannes XXII. über die Zuständigkeit der Inquisition für Zaubereiprozesse,” *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 22 (1952), 226–46; reprinted in Maier, *Ausgehendes Mittelalter: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Geistesgeschichte des 14. Jahrhunderts*, *Storia e Letteratura* 97, 105, and 138 (Rome, 1964–77), 2:59–80.

³⁰ “. . . ad quodcumque maleficium perpetrandum”: Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgung in Mittelalter* (1901; repr. Hildesheim, 1963), pp. 4–5.

demons, adore them, make or cause to be made images, or a ring, a mirror, or a phial, or some other thing in order thereby to magically bind demons. They ask things of them and receive responses from them, and demand their aid in achieving their depraved desires.”³¹ Anyone engaging in such activity was ipso facto to be excommunicated and would suffer all other appropriate penalties.

The type of sorcery to which these decrees refer is rather clearly elite necromancy. This is most evident in *Super illius specula*, in which the pope mentions images, rings, mirrors, and phials all made for magical purposes. These were the tools of complex ritual magic, not the herbs, stones, and simple charms of the common tradition.³² Quite naturally this was the form of sorcery that the pope understood and feared. By the fourteenth century many large courts had their share of attendant magicians, mainly astrologers and other prognosticators, alchemists, and physicians, who practiced ritual magic for the amusement, health, and political advantage of their employers.³³ The presence of such magic, and the ever-present political tensions of court life, gave rise to much concern in courtly circles about the potential threat posed by darker forms of learned magic.³⁴ By commanding papal inquisitors to take action against all sorcerers, however, Pope John ensured that his fears would affect the lives of many people living far from courtly halls of power, people familiar with far different forms of magic. It is fortunate that one of the inquisitors to whom John directed his decree left behind one of the most detailed accounts ever written of inquisitorial thought and practice. I refer to perhaps the most famous of all medieval inquisitors, Bernard Gui, and his great handbook, the *Practica inquisitionis*, which, in its coverage of all aspects of inquisitorial procedure, includes sections on sorcery and demonic invocation. In this handbook, which was widely copied and very influential on all future inquisitorial practice,³⁵ appear the beginnings of the confusion, on the part of church authorities, between elite necromancy and more common forms of sorcery that would culminate in the idea of witchcraft.

The Dominican Bernard Gui, although now made famous in Umberto Eco's

³¹ Hansen, *Quellen*, pp. 5–6.

³² On the use of such implements in magic, and especially in necromancy, see Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 157–61, and more recently Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, passim.

³³ On such “courtly” magic, see Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 96–100; also Jan R. Veensta, *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Text and Context of Laurens Pignon's “Contra les devineurs”* (1411), Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 83 (Leiden, 1997), esp. pp. 59–96 for cases of magic at late-medieval courts, and pp. 127–34 on astrology at the court of Burgundy; and Hilary M. Carey, *Courting Disaster: Astrology at the English Court and University in the Later Middle Ages* (New York, 1992), passim, but esp. pp. 25–36. On astrology at the papal court, see Jean-Patrice Boudet, “Le papauté d'Avignon et l'astrologie,” in *Fin du monde et signes des temps: Visionnaires et prophètes en France méridionale (fin XIIIe–début XVe siècle)*, Cahiers de Fanjeaux 27 (Toulouse, 1992), pp. 257–93.

³⁴ Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, p. 10, notes that in the years 1300–1330, two-thirds of all sorcery trials took place at various secular and ecclesiastical courts. On accusations of magic at court, and the political tensions that produced them, see William R. Jones, “The Political Uses of Sorcery in Medieval Europe,” *The Historian* 34 (1972), 670–87; and Peters, *Magician*, pp. 112–25.

³⁵ Peters, *Magician*, p. 132; James B. Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society: Power, Discipline, and Resistance in Languedoc* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997), p. 46.

Name of the Rose for conducting a fictional witch trial in Italy, was actually an inquisitor in Toulouse for almost twenty years, from 1307 until he “retired” to become bishop of Lodève in 1324.³⁶ At the end of his inquisitorial career, from 1321 to 1324, Gui compiled his *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis*, a summation of his experience and the first truly comprehensive instructional manual for inquisitors, dealing with every subject, and every heresy, upon which an inquisition might touch.³⁷ As such, it became one of the most important and influential inquisitorial documents produced in the Middle Ages. Scholars of witchcraft have often examined this source and have generally deemed that it contains no mention of the crime—not surprising since the idea of witchcraft would not emerge in clear form for another one hundred years.³⁸ The picture of sorcery that emerges from the *Practica*, however, is both surprising and illuminating, and it deserves closer attention.

The first thing one notes about the subject of sorcery in the *Practica* is the remarkably brief space Gui devoted to it. Out of a work of several hundred pages, which admittedly does strive to cover the entire range of inquisitorial activity, the section “On Sorcerers and Diviners and Invokers of Demons” contains only a scant few pages.³⁹ This certainly reflects the significance of sorcery in Gui’s own work as an inquisitor. Between the years 1308 and 1323, when he tried nearly one thousand heretics, not a single case of sorcery is found in Gui’s book of sentences.⁴⁰ Records of sorcery trials in this period do exist from inquisitions in Carcassonne and from other local courts,⁴¹ but clearly, despite papal pressure, sorcery was not yet a pressing concern for ecclesiastical authorities in southern France.

Nevertheless, although Gui tried no sorcerers personally, he clearly knew of the crime and felt that the readers of his manual might well encounter it. In the *Practica* he set forth a series of questions that were to be asked of any sorcerer brought before an inquisitorial tribunal. What is so interesting here is the fact that, upon close examination, these questions reveal that the type of sorcery Gui thought inquisitors would typically be encountering was in fact common sorcery, not elite necromancy. For example, Gui specifically instructed inquisitors to ask accused sorcerers about “curing diseases by conjurations or incantations,”⁴² yet medical

³⁶ Aside from Eco, the most recent extended discussion of Gui’s life in English is Bernard Guenée, *Between Church and State: The Lives of Four French Prelates in the Late Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1987), pp. 37–70.

³⁷ I have used Gui, *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis*, ed. C. Douais (Paris, 1886). Most of the sections on sorcery are also given in Hansen, *Quellen*, pp. 47–55. On inquisitorial manuals in general and their use, see Given, *Inquisition*, pp. 44–51.

³⁸ Peters, *Magician*, p. 132.

³⁹ Gui, *Practica* 5.6.1–2, pp. 292–93.

⁴⁰ Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, 3 vols. (New York, 1888), 2:454.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² “. . . item, de curatione infirmitatum per conjuria seu carmina verborum”: Gui, *Practica* 5.6.2, p. 292.

magic figured almost not at all in elite necromantic practice.⁴³ On the other hand, by far the most typical use of common sorcery was to heal, or conversely to inflict disease or suffering.⁴⁴ Gui also instructed that suspects should be asked what they might know or may have learned about “thieves to be imprisoned” and about “discovering thefts committed or disclosing secrets.”⁴⁵ After healing and warding off disease, the discovery of theft and the subsequent divination of the guilty party, or simply the location of a lost item if no theft was involved, were among the standard uses of common magic.⁴⁶ Love magic and spells and charms designed to produce affection (or discord) or to aid in conception were also among the standard elements of the common tradition,⁴⁷ and Gui included questions about “concord or discord between husbands and wives; [and] also causing the sterile to conceive.”⁴⁸ The evidence that most clearly indicates that the inquisitors and judges for whom Gui was writing were dealing with common sorcery, however, is the passage referring to the implements and devices by which that magic was worked. Gui instructed that inquisitors should ask about “these things which they [the sorcerers] give to be eaten, hair and nails and certain other things,” and about “making incantations or conjuring through incantations, with fruits and herbs, with girdles and other materials.”⁴⁹ Here we see the sort of everyday items typically used in common spells and charms, not the costly rings and polished mirrors of ritual demonic magic that Pope John feared. Only at the end of this section did Gui briefly mention baptized images of wax and images of lead and various other devices, which might seem more the tools of learned necromancers schooled in church ritual.⁵⁰

From all of this, it is evident that the sort of magical practice Gui was encountering, if not in his own trials than from the reports of other inquisitors and judges, was common magic. What is not evident, however, is that he conceived of such magic any differently from the learned ritual necromancy that so concerned Pope John. That Gui believed this magic to be demonic in nature is certain. He wrote explicitly of the invocation of demons at the beginning of his section on sorcery (although perhaps tellingly never again in the course of his questions), and beyond this the church had already established that, for sorcery to fall under the purview

⁴³ On various uses for necromancy, see Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 158; and far more extensively Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, pp. 42–122.

⁴⁴ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 57–60 and 64–68; and Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971), pp. 177–211. Thomas’s study deals with early-modern England, but practices had changed little since the Middle Ages.

⁴⁵ “. . . item, de latronibus includendis” and “. . . item, de inveniendis furtis factis seu rebus occultis manifestandis”: Gui, *Practica* 5.6.2, p. 292.

⁴⁶ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 89–90; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 212–22.

⁴⁷ See Richard Kieckhefer, “Erotic Magic in Medieval Europe,” in *Sex in the Middle Ages*, ed. Joyce E. Salisbury, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 1360, Garland Medieval Casebooks 3 (New York, 1991), pp. 30–55.

⁴⁸ Gui, *Practica* 5.6.2, p. 292.

⁴⁹ “. . . item, de hiis que dant ad comedendum pilos, et ungues et quedam alia” and “. . . item, de carminando seu conjurando per carmina verborum, poma et herbas, corrigias et alia”: *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Gui, *Practica* 5.6.2, p. 293.

of inquisitors, it had to involve manifest heresy, which generally meant the involvement of demons.⁵¹ In addition, in the formula for abjuration that Gui proposed for sorcerers, he explicitly included in the list of acts to be forsworn “all divination or invocation of demons, especially with adoration or reverence exhibited to them, or which will be exhibited, or with homage done or to be done to them, or with any sort of sacrifice or burnt offering.”⁵² The understanding of magical operations contained here, of a human magician actively seeking out demonic forces and performing certain ritual acts to compel them into service, clearly fits typical necromantic practice. Yet for Gui and other authorities, such was the essential nature of most, if not all, sorcery of any sort.

As an educated cleric, Gui was well acquainted with the tradition of elite, mainly clerical necromancy. In fact, he included in the *Practica* several sections directed against clerical sorcerers that are far longer than his brief section on sorcerers and diviners in general.⁵³ Here the charges explicitly involved necromancy and diabolism.⁵⁴ Gui also presented in this section a detailed description of what a necromantic ritual might involve, drawn from a standard confession of a clerical necromancer:

Indeed through the confession of N. . . . it is determined that the said N. made and formed two images from wax, with lead from a fisherman's net, with the head formed from these things, with flies [he] collected and brought together, with spiders, with frogs and toads, with the skin of a serpent, and with many other things placed beneath the images, and with conjurations and invocations of demons added, even with blood taken from some part of his own body and mixed with the blood of a toad, and with oblation given to the demons invoked in the place of sacrifice, in honor and reverence of them, with such-and-such conjurations, observations, and superstitious, pernicious and damned rites . . . in order to procure such-and-such harmful sorcery (*ad procurandum talia et talia maleficia*).⁵⁵

This was the sort of magical practice with which Gui and other church authorities were familiar, and this was how they conceived of demonic sorcery as operating. This was not, of course, anything like what common sorcerers actually did when they employed a magical spell or charm, or crushed some herbs into a medicine, or performed any of the other far less complex acts of the common magical tradition. Gui, however, and the other authorities who read him did not draw such distinctions. Rather the *Practica inquisitionis* reveals both the clear exposure of clerical authorities to common magical practices and the implicit connection they drew between those practices and the full-fledged necromancy with which they

⁵¹ In 1258 Pope Alexander IV's decree *Quod super nonnullis* had placed acts of sorcery outside inquisitorial jurisdiction, “nisi manifeste haeresim saperent”: Hansen, *Quellen*, p. 1. The standard gloss indicated that this generally entailed the invocation of demons. See *Sextum decretalium liber* (Venice, 1567), pp. 339–41; cited in Alan Kors and Edward Peters, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe, 400–1700: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 2001), p. 118.

⁵² Gui, *Practica* 5.7.12, p. 301.

⁵³ Gui, *Practica* 3.40–43, pp. 150–59.

⁵⁴ “. . . quedam maleficia, tam sortilegia quam nigromantica et dyabolica”: Gui, *Practica* 3.40, p. 150.

⁵⁵ Gui, *Practica* 3.40, p. 153.

were also, probably more so, familiar. In the unwitting conceptual conflation of two very different types of actual magical practices, Gui's treatise may be seen as marking an initial step toward the eventual construction of the idea of witchcraft.

Only the first step had been taken, though, for the fully developed idea of witchcraft lay still nearly a century in the future. In fact, if Gui's summary of inquisitorial thought and practice can be taken as at all representative of more general clerical concerns, then despite some troubling encounters with common sorcery, ecclesiastical opposition to magical practices in the early fourteenth century remained focused primarily on learned and often explicitly clerical necromancy. Moreover, while Gui certainly held that much common sorcery was demonic in nature, with the implication that, in essence, it involved the same sort of activities as elite necromancy, he did not argue this point at any length. Nor did he attempt, in his mainly practical handbook, to draw out any of the potential intellectual ramifications that this conception of sorcery might entail. That task would be left to the next great theorist of sorcery, the Catalan inquisitor Nicholas Eymeric.

Fifty years after Bernard Gui wrote his *Practica inquisitionis*, the church remained deeply concerned about the demonic nature of many magical practices, although some dispute still remained over the basic postulation that demonic sorcery was automatically heretical. In 1374 Pope Gregory XI found it necessary to write to the French inquisitor Jacques de Morerio, granting him specific power for two years to act against such crimes and censuring all those who objected that demonic sorcery did not lie within the scope of inquisitorial authority.⁵⁶ Only two years later, in 1376, the Dominican Nicholas Eymeric, formerly inquisitor of Aragon but at this time in exile at the papal court in Avignon, completed his *Directorium inquisitionum*.⁵⁷ This work was a vast inquisitorial manual, ultimately even more influential than Gui's.⁵⁸ Among the many topics addressed, Eymeric posed the basic question of whether the actions of sorcerers and diviners were heretical, and thus whether they fell within the purview of the papal inquisitor. Answering in the affirmative, he established the basic clerical framework for the essential nature, and necessary condemnation, of all demonic sorcery for the remainder of the Middle Ages and well into the early modern period.⁵⁹ Although still focusing mainly on elite necromantic practice, his arguments form an important foundation for the later notion of witchcraft.

Like Gui, Eymeric was thoroughly knowledgeable of the principles of learned necromancy. He wrote, for example, of his familiarity with such well-known necromantic texts as the *Key of Solomon* and *Sworn Book of Honorius*, which he had seized from magicians whom he had tried, and read before consigning to the

⁵⁶ Hansen, *Quellen*, pp. 15–16.

⁵⁷ I have relied on the edition of F. Peña printed in Rome, 1587. On Eymeric, see most recently Gary Macy, "Nicolas Eymeric and the Condemnation of Orthodoxy," in *The Devil, Heresy and Witchcraft in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey B. Russell*, ed. Alberto Ferreiro, Cultures, Beliefs, and Traditions 6 (Leiden, 1998), pp. 369–81.

⁵⁸ Lea, *History of the Inquisition*, 2:174; Edward Peters, *Inquisition* (Berkeley, Calif., 1988), p. 60.

⁵⁹ Peters, *Magician*, p. 196.

flames.⁶⁰ Indeed, one scholar has called Eymeric a “connoisseur of books of necromancy,”⁶¹ and he certainly was far more deeply interested in questions about the nature of sorcery and the workings of magic than Gui ever seems to have been. Seven years before he undertook the more general *Directorium*, the Catalan inquisitor had written a treatise *Contra demonum inuocatores*, which served as the basis for his later treatment of demonic sorcery within his more general manual.⁶² Whereas Gui had merely compiled a list of practical questions to be posed to those accused of sorcery, Eymeric, in both his works, addressed the basic theological issue that underlay such questions: “Whether sorcerers and diviners, or those suspected, are to be considered as heretics?”⁶³ The answer to this question focused on the nature of demonic sorcery and on the action and intention of the human sorcerer, and thus affords extensive insight into clerical conceptions of how such magic was performed.

From the outset Eymeric was willing to concede that certain forms of magical practice were not demonic and therefore not heretical. Chiromancy (palm reading) and astrology, for example, along with some few others, might be sinful, but so long as they remained free of demonic taint, they were “merely divination or sorcery,” and not heresy.⁶⁴ Sorcery that involved demonic invocation, however, was for him always heretical. His argument ran thus: according to the necromantic texts he had consulted, demonic sorcery could be performed in three ways. The first, and most horrible, involved summoning demons and showing them adoration (*latria*) properly due only to God:

... as by sacrificing to them [demons], by adoring [them], by offering up execrable prayers, by devoting themselves to the demons, by promising obedience, by bringing something they themselves have made for the demons, by binding themselves to the demon through such things, by adjuring in the name of some superior demon that they invoke, by praising the demon or singing songs in its honor, by genuflecting, by making themselves prostrate, by observing chastity in honor of the demon or by his instruction, by fasting or by mortifying their own flesh, by wearing black or white garments in honor of the demon or by his instruction, by conjuring through characters and signs and unknown names, by burning candles, by burning incense or aloe or other aromatics, by sacrificing birds or other animals, by collecting their own blood taken from them (*san-*

⁶⁰ Eymeric, *Directorium* 2.43.1, p. 338; also mentioned in Eymeric’s earlier treatise, *Contra demonum inuocatores*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 1464, fols. 100r–161r. My thanks to Richard Kieckhefer for supplying me with a copy of his microfilm of the manuscript. On the evil inherent in necromantic texts, and thus the need to burn them as well as the necromancers, see Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, pp. 4–8.

⁶¹ Given, *Inquisition*, p. 50.

⁶² Mentioned but not excerpted in Hansen, *Quellen*, p. 66. See also n. 60 above.

⁶³ Eymeric, *Directorium* 2.42, p. 335. Eymeric begins *Contra demonum inuocatores* with three short chapters on the nature of heresy and heretics (fols. 102r–108v). The bulk of the work is then taken up by the fourth and fifth chapters, which argue the heretical nature of demonic invocation.

⁶⁴ Eymeric, *Directorium* 2.42.2, p. 336. In *Contra demonum inuocatores*, fols. 144v–145r, Eymeric argues from canon law (*Decretales Gregorii IX* 5.21.2) that only through the addition of demonic invocation could consultation of an astrolabe become heretical.

guinem proprium ex se emittere procurando), by burning birds or other animals, or parts of them, by putting salt in the fire and making a holocaust from this.⁶⁵

Akin to this form of invocation was a second method in which the sorcerer would show demons certain signs of veneration (*dulia*) such as were due properly only to saints:

. . . as by mixing the names of demons among the names of the spirits of the blessed or of the saints in certain of their own nefarious prayers, by placing them as mediators in these prayers to God, by burning candles, and by imploring God through their name or merit.⁶⁶

Both of these methods are rather obviously heretical, although in good Scholastic fashion Eymeric proved this point definitively and at great length.⁶⁷ Both also clearly relate to the sort of complex ritual magic entailed in the necromantic tradition.

Eymeric, however, also recognized a third means of performing demonic sorcery, the most interesting for my purposes here. Some sorcerers seemed to control demonic forces but demonstrated no obvious signs of adoration or veneration to the demons they invoked. A typical example of such an invocation, Eymeric noted, might be performed “by tracing a circle in the earth, by placing a boy in the circle, by fixing a mirror, a sword, an amphora, or other small body before the boy, and with the necromancer himself holding a book, and reading, and invoking the demon.”⁶⁸ Again Eymeric’s familiarity with the practices of learned ritual magic is apparent. Such seemingly worshipless invocations would appear to have presented a problem for clerical authorities intent on persecuting magicians, but Eymeric was not stymied by the dilemma. He simply proceeded to argue that the very act of invocation was itself a demonstration of worship, and thus, if directed toward a demon, an act of heresy:

Therefore to invoke is considered an act of adoration (*latría*), and is counted and placed among the acts of adoration, and it goes in advance of the true act of adoration shown to God, and an act of adoration is said to be made to a demon. Therefore, if a demon is invoked by a Christian, when it does not appear that any other act of adoration has been offered to the demon, that savors of manifest heresy and such people [who perform this] must be considered heretics.⁶⁹

In the more extended *Contra demonum inuocatores* Eymeric then offered the usual array of theological citations, mainly from Augustine and Aquinas, to support his point. In the *Directorium*, organized rather more compactly, he had already cited some of these sources in his discussion of invocation involving explicit worship, and so he merely referred to them here. His conclusions, in either case,

⁶⁵ Eymeric, *Directorium* 2.43.2, p. 338. A nearly identical passage is in Eymeric, *Contra demonum inuocatores*, fol. 128v. A more detailed discussion of acts of *latría* precedes this (fols. 124r–127v).

⁶⁶ Eymeric, *Directorium* 2.43.3, p. 338. A nearly identical passage is in Eymeric, *Contra demonum inuocatores*, fol. 129r.

⁶⁷ His arguments extend from fol. 129r to fol. 142v in *Contra demonum inuocatores*.

⁶⁸ Eymeric, *Directorium* 2.43.4, p. 338; *Contra demonum inuocatores*, fol. 129r.

⁶⁹ Eymeric, *Directorium* 2.43.14, p. 344.

were identical: “from this it is clear that to invoke and consult demons, even without sacrifice, is apostasy, apostasy from the faith, and as a consequence, heresy.”⁷⁰

At this point the discussion of sorcery in the *Directorium inquisitorum* ends. In *Contra demonum inuocatores*, however, Eymeric went on to expound on some further points, arguing chiefly that even when sorcerers performed invocations without any “manifest” signs of adoration or veneration, nevertheless inquisitors should suspect that such acts were somehow covertly present. As he wrote in his early introduction to this section of the treatise, a demon would never aid a human invoking it, “unless the invoker has shown it some honor or reverence, especially divine, by either a tacit or express pact.”⁷¹ His reasoning here was based on the straightforward assumption, founded in Augustine’s description of the nature of demons in book 10 of *The City of God*, that demons “rejoice in the errors of men” and thus would only serve human masters if by this they could draw them into error.⁷² Such reasoning was also evident in the *Directorium*, although placed in the earlier section on explicit worship, when Eymeric noted, by way of example, that, “although a book that is lost may be sought by a man, it may not by a demon, because the demon, when asked, will not respond about such things unless a pact is made with it, or illicit veneration, adjuration, and invocations.”⁷³

Throughout almost all his consideration of demonic invocation, Eymeric dealt with clearly necromantic forms of sorcery, performed via magic circles, ritual objects, and books of spells. Indeed, his arguments were aimed mostly at the quasi-religious rites of necromancy and seem intended specifically to counter the assertions made by certain learned necromancers that they never honored the demons they summoned, but rather commanded and compelled them by divine power just as Christ and his disciples had done.⁷⁴ Yet in his arguments Eymeric was laying the foundation for the later clerical conviction in the demonic power and apostasy of simple witches, for he argued that any magical act deemed by the church to involve demonic agency (as most acts of magic did, and virtually any could), even

⁷⁰ “Ex his clare patet quod demones inuocare et consulere, etiam sine sacrificio, apostasia est, apostasia a fide, et per consequens heresis”: Eymeric, *Directorium* 2.43.7, p. 339. Cf. Eymeric, *Contra demonum inuocatores*, fol. 143r: “Ex hiis patet quod sola demonis inuocacio, etiam sine sacrificio, apostata est a fide, et per consequens heresis.”

⁷¹ “Non enim inuocanti subueniret, nisi inuocans sibi aliquem honorem et reuerenciam exhiberet, et maxime diuinalem, ex pacto tacito uel expresse”: Eymeric, *Contra demonum inuocatores*, fol. 112v. The section of the treatise in which Eymeric develops this theme more fully is found on fol. 149r–v.

⁷² Eymeric, *Contra demonum inuocatores*, fol. 149r.

⁷³ Eymeric, *Directorium* 2.43.7, p. 340. This Eymeric attributed to the *Sentences* commentary of the Dominican Pietro di Tarantasia, later Pope Innocent V. Another authority on witchcraft to be discussed here, Johannes Nider, also cited Pietro in relation to witchcraft in his *De lepra morali* (c. 1430). See Hansen, *Quellen*, pp. 425 and 429.

⁷⁴ On the often self-proclaimed religious nature of necromancers’ power to control demons, see Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, pp. 107–8. Eymeric himself recognized that demons might be licitly commanded, as well as illicitly supplicated, briefly in *Directorium* 2.43.8, p. 340, and at greater length in *Contra demonum inuocatores*, fols. 157v–159v. Nevertheless, he remained deeply suspicious of necromancers, “propter amicitiam quam habent cum demonibus”: *Contra demonum inuocatores*, fol. 150v.

if it contained no hint of ritual performance that might be seen as “manifest” adoration or veneration, entailed in and of itself an act of demon worship and justifiably raised suspicions about other potentially hidden acts of worship.

Eymeric himself certainly never conceived of witchcraft when he wrote *Contra demonum inuocatores* or his *Directorium*. Even more than Gui he seems to have been cognizant only of the elite, learned system of necromancy. Like Gui, though, when he did encounter other forms of magic, he thought of them as necessarily operating on the same terms as necromancy. Consider, for example, how in each of his works Eymeric cited at length from the famous tenth-century canon *Episcopi*, which condemned sorcery in general and included the following passage:

Some wicked women, perverted by the devil, seduced by illusions and phantasms of demons, believe and profess themselves, in the hours of the night, to ride upon certain beasts with Diana, the goddess of the pagans, or with Herodias, and an innumerable multitude of women, and in the silence of the dead of night to traverse great spaces of the earth, and to obey her commands as of their mistress, and to be summoned to her service on certain nights.⁷⁵

Gui had also mentioned these women, instructing inquisitors to ask suspected sorcerers whether they had any knowledge of “the fairy women whom they call the good ones, who, it is said, make their way through the night.”⁷⁶ Obviously these figures of folklore had long been associated in some general way with common magical practices, and this belief would later become incorporated into the idea of the night flight of witches to a diabolical sabbath.⁷⁷ In the original canon, however, the belief was derided as nothing more than an illusion, and these women were presented as the gullible victims of deceptive demons.⁷⁸ Gui had offered no additional discussion. In his more extensive accounts, Eymeric asserted that these women actively invoked the demons they followed, and he then stressed the fact of their apostasy from the faith even though they did not seem to engage in any overt demon worship:

From this it appears that the aforesaid evil women, persevering in their wickedness, have departed from the right way and the faith, and that demons inflict and delude their faithless minds. If, therefore, these women, persevering in their wickedness, concerning whom it has not been established that they offer sacrifices to the demons they invoke,

⁷⁵ Eymeric, *Directorium* 2.43.8, p. 341; *Contra demonum inuocatores*, fol. 143v. The text of the canon is readily available in Hansen, *Quellen*, pp. 38–39. I follow here the English translation in Henry Charles Lea, *Materials toward a History of Witchcraft*, ed. Arthur C. Howland, 3 vols. (1939; repr. New York, 1957), 1:178–80.

⁷⁶ “. . . item, de fatis mulieribus quas vocant bonas res que, ut dicunt, vadunt de nocte”: Gui, *Practica* 5.6.2, p. 292.

⁷⁷ On the later history of the canon and its relation to emerging ideas of witchcraft, see Werner Tschacher, “Der Flug durch die Luft zwischen Illusionstheorie und Realitätsbeweis: Studien zum sog. Kanon *Episcopi* und zum Hexenflug,” *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte*, Kan. Abt. 85 (1999), 225–76.

⁷⁸ A central problem faced by later theorists of witchcraft was how to justify the reality of night flight, and thus the reality of the entire sabbath, when canon law explicitly declared it to be only an illusion. See Tschacher, “Der Flug durch die Luft,” pp. 264–74.

are perfidious and faithless and deviate from the right way . . . then, as a consequence, if they have been baptized, they must be considered heretics.⁷⁹

In this passage Eymeric advanced two critical positions. First, he presented these women, whom the earlier tradition had always viewed as passive victims of demonic temptation, as active invokers of demons. Second, he argued that, whatever form the invocation took, even if it contained no clear acts of worship, the invocation alone made these women heretics, for “to invoke, in and of itself, is taken in the holy canons as an act of worship.”⁸⁰ These two convictions, that common sorcerers were actively engaged in demonic invocation and the assumption that invocation equated to worship, were essential to the later idea of the witch.

Still, the idea of witchcraft did not emerge with Nicholas Eymeric. Although his arguments reveal a deeper concern with the basic nature and workings of demonic sorcery than Gui evinced fifty years earlier, they also indicate that even late into the fourteenth century clerical concerns about sorcery remained focused on elite practices. Indeed even at the end of the century, when the theological faculty of the University of Paris condemned a whole series of magical practices in 1398, the focus of the church was still firmly fixed on the magic of educated elites and not on the more widespread common practices that would later characterize witchcraft.⁸¹ Instead that concept appeared, in a recognizable form, only in the early decades of the fifteenth century, being codified for the first time in several sources written in the 1430s.⁸² The specific factors behind this final stage in the history of the medieval condemnation of magic remain the subject of much speculation and debate. We know with relative certainty that the number of trials for *maleficium* was on the rise in the early 1400s, especially in those regions in and around the western Alps where the first full-fledged cases of witchcraft would appear.⁸³ Perhaps clerical concerns had finally permeated to a wider audience.⁸⁴ Perhaps the increased desire for reform within the church in the early fifteenth century played a role in heightening tensions over possible demonic corruption.⁸⁵ Certainly legal reforms and the increased use of inquisitorial techniques by eccle-

⁷⁹ “Ex hiis apparet quod predictae scelerate mulieres in perfidia perseuerant a recta via deuiant atque fide, et earum mentibus infidelibus demones se obijiciunt et deludunt. Si ergo iste mulieres in perfidia perseuerant, de quibus non constat quod sacrificia offerant demonibus inuocatis, perfide infideles et a recta via deuiantes . . . per consequens, si baptizate sunt, ut heretice habende sunt”: Eymeric, *Directorium* 2.43.8, p. 341. Cf. *Contra demonum inuocatores*, fol. 143v: “. . . et per consequens expresato consilio huiusmodi mulieres heretice iudicantur, et tamen clare non aparet in earum inuocationibus quod honorem latrerie uel dulia exhibeant demonibus inuocatis.”

⁸⁰ “Ergo inuocare proprie in sacro canone pro actu latrerie sumitur”: Eymeric, *Contra demonum inuocatores*, fol. 145v.

⁸¹ Peters, *Magician*, pp. 143–45.

⁸² See *L’imaginaire du sabbat* (as above, n. 2).

⁸³ Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, pp. 10–26; confirmed in the more recent, regional study of Blauert, *Frühe Hexenverfolgungen* (see above, n. 2), pp. 17–24 and 52–53.

⁸⁴ Blauert, *Frühe Hexenverfolgungen*, pp. 118–20, notes how many early witch trials occurred in the wake of such fiery preachers as Vincent Ferrer and Bernardino of Siena. On Bernardino and witchcraft, see also Franco Mormando, *The Preacher’s Demons: Bernardino of Siena and the Social Underworld of Early Renaissance Italy* (Chicago, 1999), pp. 52–108.

⁸⁵ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 199–200.

siastical and especially now by secular courts made such trials easier to conduct.⁸⁶ With equal certainty, especially given the initially limited geographic scope of witch trials, complex local economic, social, and cultural factors also played a role.⁸⁷

As increasing attention came to focus on the practices, and the practitioners, of common sorcery, however, clerical authorities already had a solid conceptual framework, built in the fourteenth century, into which to fit these magical crimes. Their fixed notions of how magic operated contributed significantly to the formation of the new stereotype of witchcraft, for when that concept finally did appear, it reflected the confusion and the unwitting conflation of elite and common magical practices that I have been tracing. Consider the letter of 1437 from Pope Eugenius IV to all papal inquisitors, in which he expressed his “great bitterness of spirit” over certain Christians fallen away from the faith:

They sacrifice to demons, adore them, they expect and accept responses from them, they do homage to them, and as a sign of this they give them a written contract or some other sign binding themselves to these demons, so that, *by a single word, touch, or sign (ut solo verbo, tactu, vel signo)*, they might perform whatever sorcery (*maleficia*) they wish. They cure disease, provoke bad weather, and make pacts concerning other evil deeds.⁸⁸

This is exactly the scenario for which Eymeric’s arguments had prepared the way over half a century earlier. The church now equated the performance of common sorcery, involving only a few words or simple gestures and aimed at curing or causing illness or affecting the weather, with hidden yet necessary acts of worship and postulated a preexisting pact between the sorcerer and demons that made such magic possible. Indeed, such sorcerers, whom in an earlier era the church had seen more as victims and dupes of demonic illusions and had hardly taken seriously, now became all the more terrible in that they were capable of commanding demonic forces with only a few simple words or signs.

Even as Pope Eugenius was issuing his decree, other authorities were compiling the first learned accounts of witchcraft in western Europe. Most significant among these men was the Dominican theologian and ecclesiastical reformer Johannes Nider. He wrote two major works dealing, in part, with witchcraft. The first was his *Formicarius*, written in 1437 and 1438. This long treatise in five books, the fifth of which is devoted to “witches and their deceptions,” takes the form of a dialogue between a Dominican theologian, who is clearly Nider himself, and a lazy but curious student of his order. Not only does it contain the most extensive initial clerical accounts of full-fledged witchcraft, but it was also the most influential early work on the subject, surviving in numerous manuscript copies, going through seven printed editions down to 1692, and perhaps most importantly serving as a major source of information for the infamous *Malleus maleficarum* written

⁸⁶ Peters, *Magician*, pp. 148–55.

⁸⁷ See especially Borst, “Origins of the Witch-Craze”; and Paravy, *De la Chrétienté romaine* (as above, n. 2). The series of local studies emerging from Lausanne (see above, n. 27) also yields important insights, although these studies mostly focus on the latter half of the fifteenth century.

⁸⁸ Hansen, *Quellen*, pp. 17–18, my italics.

half a century later, in 1486.⁸⁹ Aside from the *Formicarius*, Nider also discussed magic and witchcraft extensively in his *Preceptorium divine legis*, under the rubric of violations of the first commandment (demonic sorcery being taken as a form of idolatry).⁹⁰ Interestingly, while this second work was written in 1438, slightly later than the *Formicarius*, and while the earlier treatise contains some quite graphic stories of all the ancillary horrors of witchcraft—sabbaths, orgies, cannibalism, etc.—the more purely theoretical *Preceptorium* discusses only the essentials of demonic sorcery—pacts, worship, and so forth.⁹¹

Nevertheless, both works clearly focus on common magical practices and common practitioners of magic. Both also reveal the same conception of the basic nature and operation of common sorcery as found in Pope Eugenius's letter. In the *Formicarius*, for example, Nider explained how witches could achieve nothing by their own power, "but they are said to harm through words, rites, or actions as if through pacts initiated with demons."⁹² Again in the *Preceptorium*, he made it clear that witches could work their magic only through the cooperation of demons by means of a pact made "at the beginning of the world."⁹³ He then went on to give an example of how such a pact was supposed to function. When a witch wished to cause rain, for instance, she might do so by stirring some liquid with the handle of a broom. This action, however, was in reality only a sign given to a demon that would then hasten to cause the actual storm.⁹⁴ What is so significant here is not simply that witches performed their magic via the agency of demons, but that these demons now seemed to be bound permanently to the witch, apparently hovering around her in wait for her slightest act or gesture to send them off to perform terrible magic.

Of course, the full stereotype of witchcraft involved far more than just demonic pacts and harmful sorcery. Witches were believed to have entered into total apos-

⁸⁹ On this work, see Werner Tschacher, *Der Formicarius des Johannes Nider von 1437/38: Studien zu den Anfängen der europäischen Hexenverfolgungen im Spätmittelalter* (Aachen, 2000). I am also completing a monograph on Nider, which will include extensive discussion of the *Formicarius*. At present, there is no complete modern edition of the work, although selections are edited in Hansen, *Quellen*, pp. 89–99, and more recently by Catherine Chène in *L'imaginaire du sabbat*, pp. 122–203. Where I cite material thus covered, I give page numbers from *L'imaginaire du sabbat* in addition to book and chapter citation. Otherwise I give page numbers from *Formicarius*, ed. G. Colvener (Douai, 1602).

⁹⁰ There is no modern edition, but a brief overview can be found in Lea, *Materials*, 1:265–72. I have relied on the 1489 Milan edition.

⁹¹ Nider's discussion here is similar to, although far more extensive than, that in his earlier work *De lepra morali* (see below, n. 93).

⁹² Nider, *Formicarius* 5.3 (*L'imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 148).

⁹³ "De hoc etiam infra dicitur non autem faciunt ista immediate maleficorum opera actione propria et immediata, sed talia fiunt per demones qui visis maleficiis immediate ex pacto dudum cum maleficis a principio mundi et tempore veteris idolatrie habito sciunt qualem effectum debent ad intentionem maleficorum procurare": Nider, *Preceptorium* 1.11.v. Nider also makes mention of the necessity of pacts, either explicit or implicit, in *De lepra morali* (Cologne, c. 1467–72), fols. 60v–61r.

⁹⁴ "... ut exempli gratia: Scopam quam malefica intingit aquam, ut pluatur, non causat pluuiam, sed demon talibus visis qui, si deus permiserit, potestatem habet in omnia corporalia, et in aerem uentos et nubes, ut statim talia procuraret et causare ualeat. Maga siquidem signum dat per scopam, sed demon illud procurat et agit ut pluatur per demonis actionem": Nider, *Preceptorium* 1.11.v.

tasy from the faith and to have given themselves over body and soul to Satan. They were therefore not just individuals possessing harmful supernatural powers but members of a vast conspiratorial satanic cult. Onto basic issues of *maleficium* and diabolism were added a host of other charges drawn in many cases from standard medieval antiheretical polemic and also incorporating elements of popular folklore such as the night flight of witches to a sabbath.⁹⁵ Despite these various, and often horrific, flourishes, however, the clerical conception of witchcraft grew directly from ecclesiastical authorities' understanding of common sorcery, and more basically from their conflation of common sorcery and elite necromancy. Here the writings of Johannes Nider are critical sources, above all his *Formicarius*, for a close reading of this work reveals two distinct notions of magic placed side by side: full-fledged witchcraft and the earlier conception of "mere" demonic sorcery.⁹⁶ Thus in this treatise we get a picture almost of the very moment when sorcery became witchcraft in clerical minds.

By far the most graphic tales of witchcraft in the *Formicarius* focus on the notion of the witches' sabbath. Within the space of a single chapter, Nider presented three separate but related descriptions of these sinister gatherings. The first concerned a group of witches who supposedly had seized, slaughtered, and devoured some thirty infants in the territory of the city of Bern. The local populace was, understandably, brought to a near frenzy and demanded that the authorities take action. When some of the supposed witches were captured, they were made to confess how and why they had murdered so many children. According to the confession of one of the accused, the method was as follows:

With infants not yet baptized, or even baptized ones, especially if they are not protected by the sign of the cross and by prayers, these ones, through our ceremonies, we kill in their cradles, or lying at their parents' sides. . . . We secretly remove [them] from their graves. We boil [them] in a cauldron until, with the bones torn out, almost all the flesh is made into a liquid draft. From the more solid matter we make an unguent suitable for our desires, and arts, and transmutations. With the more liquid fluid, we fill up a flask or a leather bottle, [and] he who drinks from this, with a few ceremonies added, immediately is made a member and a master of our sect.⁹⁷

This "confession," of course, does little to give us an accurate understanding of how sorcery might actually have been practiced in the rural hinterlands of the territory of Bern. But it does serve to give a clear indication of how authorities

⁹⁵ See Russell, *Witchcraft*, p. 23, although I differ with Russell as to place of emphasis among these various categories. On aspects of witchcraft drawn from heresy, Russell remains best. On "folkloric" roots of witchcraft, see Ginzburg, *Ecstasies* (as above, n. 5); and his earlier, less far-reaching (and less problematic) *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1983). See also Gábor Klaniczay, "Shamanistic Elements in Central European Witchcraft," in idem, *The Uses of Supernatural Power: The Transformation of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, N.J., 1990), pp. 129–50; and Wolfgang Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf: Chonrad Stoecklin and the Phantoms of the Night*, trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort (Charlottesville, Va. 1998).

⁹⁶ Catherine Chène also notes this distinction in *L'imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 264, but she provides little discussion of its significance.

⁹⁷ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.3 (*L'imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 154).

believed sorcery was being performed. In their minds, sorcery had become witchcraft. Nider clearly presented witches operating as members of an organized sect and performing the blackest sort of magic imaginable.⁹⁸

Focusing only on the murder and cannibalizing of children, the account above does not describe any orgies, devil worship, or other stereotypes of the witches' sabbath, but Nider immediately presented a second account, illustrating additional horrors of the sabbath. A young man, brought into a sect of witches with his wife and later captured by authorities, provide a detailed account of how he had been initiated into the diabolic cult:

"The order," he said, "in which I was seduced is thus. It is necessary, first, on the Lord's Day, before the holy water is consecrated, that the future disciple, along with the masters, enter directly into the church, and there before them deny Christ, his faith, baptism, and the universal Church. Then he must do homage to the *magisterulus*, that is, to the little master. For thus and not otherwise they call the demon. Finally he drinks from the bottle mentioned above [i.e., in the above quoted passage], by which act instantly he feels himself to have received within himself images of our arts, and to retain the principal rites of this sect. In this way I was seduced."⁹⁹

In this fuller description, we see a near-complete picture of a sabbath: a sect of witches gathering in the presence of a presiding demon and exchanging apostasy and devil worship for magical power.

Both of these descriptions of sabbaths came, according to Nider, from a secular judge, Peter of Bern, who had conducted a series of trials for *maleficium* in the Simme valley of the western Alps in the early years of the fifteenth century, several decades before Nider wrote.¹⁰⁰ Strong evidence suggests, however, that the images of the sabbath described above did not actually appear in those trials. For one thing, no original trial records surviving from the period (unfortunately, the records from the Simme valley have been lost) make any mention of the idea of the sabbath.¹⁰¹ The idea seems to have developed only decades later, in the 1430s. Moreover, Nider himself presented a third example of a contemporary sabbath, which closely resembles his other two accounts. Consider this further passage:

Finally, this year I learned from the aforesaid inquisitor [of Autun]¹⁰² that in the duchy of Lausanne [*sic*]¹⁰³ certain witches cooked their own newly born babies and ate them.

⁹⁸ The murder and cannibalizing of infants was one of the most pervasive and disturbing defamations regularly attributed to witches. See Richard Kieckhefer, "Avenging the Blood of Children: Anxiety over Child Victims and the Origins of the European Witch Trials," in *The Devil, Heresy and Witchcraft* (above, n. 57), pp. 91–109. Also Paravy, *De la Chrétienté romaine*, 2:832–33.

⁹⁹ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.3 (*L'imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 156).

¹⁰⁰ On the identity of this man, see *L'imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 224. On the larger circumstances surrounding these trials, see Borst, "Origins of the Witch-Craze."

¹⁰¹ Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, p. 20.

¹⁰² A few lines above, Nider mentioned that he had learned of witchcraft primarily from Peter of Bern and "ab inquisitore Eduensi, qui nostri ordinis fuit in conventu Ludunensi devotus reformatore, et in Eduensi dyocesi multos de maleficiis reos inquisierat": *Formicarius* 5.3 (*L'imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 150). On the possible identity of this inquisitor, see *L'imaginaire du sabbat*, pp. 231–32.

¹⁰³ There was no duchy of Lausanne. This could mean either the diocese of Lausanne or the duchy of Savoy, which shared considerable overlap. See *L'imaginaire du sabbat*, pp. 234–35.

Moreover, the means of learning such art was, so he said, that the witches came together in a certain convocation, and through their efforts, they saw a demon visibly in an assumed human form, to whom it was necessary that the disciple pledge that he would deny Christianity, would never adore the Eucharist, and would secretly trample on the cross whenever he could.¹⁰⁴

Here again is a portrait of a diabolically organized sect of witches in which worship is exchanged for magical knowledge, and this image of the sabbath is explicitly dated to 1437 or 1438, when the account was written. Scholars have therefore argued, quite reasonably, that Nider freely “interpreted” Peter of Bern’s earlier cases in light of the new idea of a cult of witches and of the witches’ sabbath that had developed only in the intervening years.¹⁰⁵

What sort of magical practices might those trials have actually dealt with, however? What had Nider “interpreted” into witchcraft, and what might this “interpretation” tell us about how he perceived and understood such practices? Intermingled with terrible tales of full-fledged witchcraft, the *Formicarius* also contains other stories that offer a clearly distinct vision (although Nider himself seems not to have recognized the distinction) of demonic sorcery being practiced in the high valleys of the Alps. These examples, too, Nider took from Judge Peter of Bern, but they seem much more reliable, reflecting more accurately the sort of sorcery that might indeed have been performed around 1400 and, not insignificantly in terms of their credibility, centering on a single definite character who is named the “great witch” (*grandis maleficus*) Staedelin.

Nider first presented Staedelin in the context of examples focusing on how witches were supposed to murder children. Whereas in the accounts involving sabbaths, however, the witches dragged children’s corpses from their graves, boiled them down in cauldrons, and eagerly drank the resulting brew, with Staedelin Nider offered a far less sensational account, seemingly closer to actual *maleficium* as commonly practiced. Certainly Staedelin was still accused of killing children through sorcery, but he allegedly did so in a more mundane fashion. Arrested and brought before Peter’s court, he confessed that he had murdered seven babies in the womb of a certain woman, magically inducing her to abort every child she had conceived for several years. He also afflicted the fertility of all the animals belonging to this woman and her husband. His method was simple, he confessed. He had performed a spell that involved burying a lizard under the threshold stone of the house. When authorities removed the lizard, or rather the dust into which it had crumbled in the course of years, the fertility of both humans and beasts was immediately restored.¹⁰⁶ This amounted to nothing more than common sorcery, which often aimed to afflict the fertility of humans, animals, and crops. There was no accusation of infant cannibalism, even though that was ex-

¹⁰⁴ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.3 (*L’imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 154).

¹⁰⁵ An argument first advanced by Blauert, *Frühe Hexenverfolgungen* (above, n. 2), pp. 57–59. Although some of Blauert’s reading of early theorists of witchcraft has been challenged by scholars such as Catherine Chène, Martine Ostorero, and Kathrin Utz Tremp, this aspect of his analysis of Nider has been largely accepted. See *L’imaginaire du sabbat*, pp. 247–48.

¹⁰⁶ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.3 (*L’imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 152).

pressly Nider's topic in introducing the story.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, there was no overt indication of demonic involvement, although Nider and other authorities would doubtless have rationalized that the lizard served as a mere sign to demons as to which household they were to assail.

Another story about Staedelin does reveal an explicitly demonic element to his magic. Captured by Peter of Bern, he was forced to confess how he conjured hailstorms to destroy crops (again a standard purpose of common *maleficium*). Standing in an open field, he performed the necessary conjurations:

With certain words we implore the prince of all demons, that he should send some [demon] of his, who would strike the place designated by us. Then, when some demon arrives, we immolate a young black fowl at some crossroads, throwing it high into the air. The demon takes up this [offering], obeys [us], and immediately rouses the air . . . by casting hail and lightning.¹⁰⁸

This is clearly demonic magic, although one must wonder whether these were Staedelin's own words or those of a confession forced upon him by the judge. In any event, even if Staedelin and his fellows were practicing demonic magic, with the sacrifice of the black fowl symbolizing some sort of offering from sorcerer to demon, there is no indication here of apostasy, elaborate devil worship, or other terrible aspects of witchcraft.

Nor, despite the use of the plural above, is there any indication that Staedelin was a member of any diabolical sect. Rather Nider revealed that Staedelin had learned his black arts, not from demons in the context of a sabbath, but from a known lineage of human teachers. Approximately sixty years earlier, Nider wrote, or around 1375, a man called Scavius (literally, the scabby man) lived in the Simme valley and was the first great "witch" to reside there. Among his many powers he was supposedly able to transform himself into a mouse and thus escape those who sought to capture him.¹⁰⁹ He had a disciple named Hoppe, and it was he, in turn, who made Staedelin into a "master of witchcraft."¹¹⁰ These two men, Staedelin and Hoppe, practiced magic together for some time, and of them Nider wrote:

When it pleases them, these two knew how to carry over a third part of the dung, hay, or grain, or whatever sort of thing from their neighbor's field, with no one seeing them, to their own field; how to raise enormous hailstorms and destructive winds with lightning; how to hurl children walking near water, in the sight of their parents, into that [water] with no one seeing them; how to bring about sterility in people and animals; [and] how to harm those near them both physically and in goods.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ He writes: "Sunt igitur vel noviter fuerunt . . . circa districtum Bernensis domini quidam malefici utriusque sexus qui contra humane nature inclinationem . . . proprie speciei infantes vorant et comedere solent. Nam in oppido Boltingen Lausanensis dyocesis, quidam dictus Sca'deli, grandis maleficus . . .": *ibid.* (*L'imaginaire du sabbat*, pp. 150–52). Boltigen was the chief town of the Simme valley.

¹⁰⁸ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.4 (*L'imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 180).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* (*L'imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 168).

¹¹⁰ "Hic [Scavius] tamen sue fraudis commenta discipulo, qui Hoppe vocabatur, reliquit et idem supradictum Sca'delin in maleficium magistrum fecit": *ibid.* (*L'imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 168).

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* (*L'imaginaire du sabbat*, pp. 168–70).

Again, these are all aspects of common sorcery, without any overt indication of demonic involvement.¹¹² Staedelin was an individual who worked his magic, which he himself may or may not have believed to be demonic in nature, in order to harm his neighbors. He worked either alone or with one other person, seemingly motivated only by his own greed or malice. There is certainly no indication that he was a servant of Satan or a member of a diabolical cult. It was only in the years after Staedelin was active in the very early fifteenth century, yet before Nider wrote in 1437, that the idea of sorcery was transformed so completely in the minds of authorities into the horror of witchcraft.

That this transformation was complete by the late 1430s there can be no doubt. Nider offered no indication that he saw any difference between Staedelin's activities and those of the witches involved in the sabbaths he described. He termed Staedelin *maleficus*, just as he did these other people, and he intermingled the two types of stories without distinction in his writing. In his mind, clearly, the older notion of demonic sorcery had been fully transformed into satanic witchcraft. The one firmly implied the other. But why did Nider, in all other respects a reasonable, even cautious thinker, accept this new characterization of magical activity?¹¹³ Here again, the answer lies in the clerical conflation of learned necromancy with common sorcery.

As with the other ecclesiastical authorities discussed here, Nider was fully acquainted with the complex workings of learned demonic magic. In his *Formicarius* he wrote that he personally knew a certain Benedictine monk living in Vienna who, before he took up his monastic vows, "was a very famous necromancer, for he had books of demons concerning necromancy, and following these he lived rather miserably and dissolutely for a long time."¹¹⁴ Nider recounted how he had often conferred with this man concerning matters of witchcraft, drawing on his past expertise as a necromancer.¹¹⁵ He was able to consult a former clerical necromancer about the sort of common sorcery witches supposedly performed because, of course, he recognized no distinction between these two magical traditions. At one point in the dialogue of the *Formicarius*, his curious pupil asked Nider whether necromancy differed at all from witchcraft, that is, common *maleficium*. "Because you made mention of necromancers (*de nigromanticis*)," the young man stated, "I ask whether there is any difference between them and witches (*maleficus*)."¹¹⁶ The theologian answered that, in general, necromancers were no different from witches: "In common usage they are called necromancers who, through a pact with demons [and] through faith in ceremonies, predict future events, or manifest certain hidden things by the revelation of demons, or who harm those around them by sorcery (*maleficiis*), and who are often harmed them-

¹¹² On the elements of the common tradition of magic, see Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, pp. 48–64; and Paravy, *De la Chrétienté romaine*, 2:830–40 and 855–57.

¹¹³ My forthcoming monograph (see above, n. 89) will situate witchcraft within Nider's broader thought.

¹¹⁴ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.4 (*L'imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 166).

¹¹⁵ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.3 (*L'imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 150).

selves by demons.”¹¹⁶ This description, Nider made clear, applied equally to common sorcerers as to learned clerical magicians.¹¹⁷

The intricate ritual magic of learned necromancy and the common sorcery at the root of witchcraft were, however, worlds apart. A necromancer performed his magic through complex rites and invocations designed to compel an essentially unwilling and dangerous demonic agent to come and serve him.¹¹⁸ This was the sort of magic that had concerned Pope John XXII in 1326, a complex form of ritual invocation contained in books and performed with rings, mirrors, and phials. One hundred years later, in 1437, however, Pope Eugenius IV feared men and women, clearly uneducated, who could perform terrible demonic sorcery “by a single word, touch, or sign.” At one point in his writings, Johannes Nider even seems to maintain that the agency behind giving someone the “evil eye” might be demonic. Thus, thanks to the existence of a pact between them, a witch might be able to command a demon’s obedience with a mere glance of her eyes.¹¹⁹

How could clerical minds explain the fact that certain simple people seemed to hold such complete and easy mastery over powerful demons when learned necromancers, and even the church’s own exorcists, had to engage in long and complex rites, and still often failed to compel demons to obey their commands?¹²⁰ The answer lay in the notion of a pact between the sorcerer/witch and the demon, an idea that stretched at least as far back as Augustine, but which now attained a new significance. Anytime a demon performed any act for a human, even when no obvious rituals of invocation and worship were present, that was sure evidence that the human had at some previous time offered worship to the demon. Thus sorcerers of all sorts were proven to be heretics. Naturally, then, authorities began to associate long-standing stereotypes about heretical cults, involving Satanism, infanticide, cannibalism, and sexual orgies, with sorcery and sorcerers.¹²¹ Likewise they easily intensified such harmful acts associated with common sorcery as causing infertility, killing children, and destroying crops into a diabolical conspiracy on the part of an organized cult of witches directed by Satan himself. Yet to clerical authorities, witches were actually more powerful and more terrible than even the greatest necromancer, possessing an easy and immediate access to demonic power,

¹¹⁶ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.4 (*L’imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 164).

¹¹⁷ *L’imaginaire du sabbat*, p. 250.

¹¹⁸ Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, esp. pp. 14–17. See also Cohn, *Europe’s Inner Demons*, pp. 110–11; and Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 167–68.

¹¹⁹ Nider is drawing on Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2.2.36. “Nam ut [Thomas] inquit, ex forti imaginatione anime immutantur spiritus corporis coniecti. Que quidem immutatio spiritum maxime fit in oculis ad quos subtiliores spiritus proueniunt. . . . Possibile est etiam quod, dei permissione vel ex aliquo occulto fato, cooperantur ad hoc malignitas demonum, cum quibus sortilege uetule pactum aliquod habent”: Nider, *Preceptorium* 1.11.ee.

¹²⁰ Nider discussed exorcism, and the various reasons why an exorcism could fail, in *Formicarius* 5.2 (Colvener, pp. 342–43).

¹²¹ On late-medieval stereotypes connecting heresy with Satanism, see Alexander Patschovsky, “Der Ketzer als Teufelsdiener,” in *Papsttum, Kirche und Recht im Mittelalter: Festschrift für Horst Fuhrmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Hubert Mordek (Tübingen, 1991), pp. 317–34. On the connection to orgies and Satanism, see Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (Notre Dame, Ind., 1991), pp. 25–34.

whereas learned magicians relied on lengthy and intricate invocations to compel demons into their service. The idea of witchcraft helped explain away this discrepancy, too, for witches went far beyond offering demons single, limited acts of adoration or veneration. They had forsworn their faith entirely and had surrendered themselves, quite literally body and soul,¹²² to the Prince of Darkness. They were able to command powerful demons with just a few words or gestures, but only because they themselves had already become the servants of Satan. The devil, having received the witches' homage, was only too happy to place his demons at their disposal, knowing that they would only use this power toward his evil ends.

The figure of the witch bound in a pact to Satan and acting as his servant in the world was, in a sense, certainly the culmination of the Christian conception of sorcery as inherently demonic that had existed throughout the Middle Ages. Yet the idea of witchcraft also represented an important new development in the history of magic. Although clerical authorities clearly believed witches performed their magic by essentially the same means as learned necromancers, namely, via demons under their command, still there were profound differences between the idea of witchcraft and earlier notions of demonic sorcery. These involved not only the sort of person who might typically perform such magic, but also the means by which demons were compelled to carry out magical acts, and the larger circumstances that such demonic invocations suggested and entailed. These differences greatly affected how authorities responded to magic and to the people believed to perform it. Although demonic sorcery had always been a religious concern, never before in the Christian West had demonic forces been perceived to be such a pervasive threat in the world.¹²³ And never before had the church been ready to believe that so many simple, uneducated people could really and readily access such terrible power. The great witch-hunts of the early modern period are inconceivable without these critical changes in the perception of magic first by clerical authorities, and then increasingly by secular authorities as well, in the later Middle Ages. Given that important legal and social developments certainly helped to fan the flames,¹²⁴ at root the witch-hunts were fueled by a profound conviction in the potentially pervasive spread of demonic sorcery, and a profound fear of the basic evil—complete submission to the devil—that such sorcery was believed to entail, far greater than had been evident in the earlier Christian era. This conviction and this fear stemmed directly from changing conceptions of sorcery, and many stereotypical elements of witchcraft can be explained, or at least clarified, by understanding these new clerical convictions of how such magic operated.

To modern minds, the single most immediately apparent element of the witch stereotype was that, throughout the long era of the great hunts, the vast majority of those tried, and an even greater percentage of those executed, for the crime of witchcraft were female. Yet this has also proven to be one of the most difficult

¹²² Aside from the obvious sexual surrender, two early sources contemporary to Nider's accounts, the anonymous *Errores Gazariorum* and the account of the Lucerne chronicler Hans Fründ, described witches pledging some of their limbs to Satan after death. See *L'imaginaire du sabbat*, pp. 32 and 290.

¹²³ Russell, *Lucifer*, p. 301; Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, p. 24.

¹²⁴ See studies cited in nn. 2, 11, and 27 above.

aspects of witchcraft to explain.¹²⁵ Stuart Clark has recently, and wisely, turned the question on its head, noting that witchcraft was more often associated with women than with men quite simply because witchcraft was inherently a female crime.¹²⁶ What needs to be asked, then, is how this aspect of magic became feminized.¹²⁷ Here again the answer, or at least an important part of the answer, lies in the conflation of elite and common beliefs about magic that has been the focus here and in the changing conceptions of what magic required and entailed that emerged from this conflation.

Surviving court records from the fourteenth century reveal that in trials for *maleficium* prior to 1350, as notions of common sorcery and necromancy were only beginning to collide, men constituted over 70 percent of the accused, and this decided majority may well reflect a prejudice on the part of authorities *against* believing that women could also be capable of such crimes.¹²⁸ After all, the system of magic that these authorities understood and were concerned about was essentially learned necromancy, which, insofar as it was mainly a clerical form of magic, was therefore also mainly a male form of magic. Certainly, women had long been active in the common tradition of medieval magic as village healers, wise women, and soothsayers,¹²⁹ but such women could hardly be suspected of anything like learned necromancy. They had neither the training to perform such acts nor, in the view of most clerical authorities, the capacity for such knowledge. However, as authorities began to perceive a system whereby simple, uneducated people might also gain terrible power over demons, indeed far greater power than even

¹²⁵ Many theories have been advanced to explain the predominantly female nature of witchcraft. Most have focused on the use of witchcraft accusations in disciplining women who did not, in some sense, conform to established social roles. Numerous scholars such as Alan MacFarlane, Keith Thomas, H. C. Erik Midelfort, and E. William Monter have explored these issues in early-modern Europe, but the most extended and detailed study of this aspect of witchcraft is Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, 1987). More recent research tends to explore issues of psychology, sexuality, and the body as explanations for why women were seen as witches: e.g., Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1994); Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995); Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997); and Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1999). While Elliott's study does not focus solely on witchcraft, the broad points it makes about medieval perceptions of women's bodies are quite important.

¹²⁶ Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, pp. 110–11.

¹²⁷ Clark, limiting himself to the period of the hunts proper, explicitly passes over this issue (*Thinking with Demons*, p. 112).

¹²⁸ I derive these and following figures from the "Calendar of Witch Trials" in Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, pp. 106–47. My figures differ slightly from those in Susanna Burghartz, "Hexenverfolgung als Frauenverfolgung? Zur Gleichsetzung von Hexen und Frauen am Beispiel der Luzerner und Lausanner Hexenprozesse des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts," in *Schweizerische Historikerinnentagung: Beiträge*, ed. Lisa Berrisch et al. (Zurich, 1986), pp. 86–105; reprinted in *Der Hexenstreit: Frauen in der frühneuzeitlichen Hexenverfolgung*, ed. Claudia Opitz (Freiburg i/Br, 1995), pp. 147–73, at pp. 151–52. Burghartz also relied on Kieckhefer's data.

¹²⁹ Most studies of witchcraft include some discussion of women's roles in common or popular magic. An important comment on this historiography is David Harley, "Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch," *Social History of Medicine* 3 (1990), 1–26.

learned necromancers wielded—in other words as the idea of witchcraft emerged more clearly out of earlier ideas about sorcery—they could come more and more readily to accept the idea that women might also be active in this crime, and ultimately they could convince themselves that women were far more inclined toward witchcraft than men were.

This transformation is clearly visible in the surviving trial records. Before 1350, as noted above, a significant majority of those tried for sorcery were men. In the second half of the fourteenth century, however, the percentage of men accused fell to 42 percent, while women took over the majority with 58 percent. In the early fifteenth century the percentage of women continued to rise to between 60 and 70 percent.¹³⁰ Finally, during the era of the great witch-hunts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, over 80 percent of the victims were women, and many of the men who went to the stake were associated with female witches in some way, most often as their husbands or sons.¹³¹ The shift is also evident in learned treatises on sorcery and witchcraft. By the end of the fifteenth century, the profoundly misogynist *Malleus maleficarum* became the definitive ecclesiastical statement on the proclivity of women toward witchcraft.¹³² Yet many of the arguments that the *Malleus* would later repeat, especially concerning the particular female susceptibility to evil based on long-standing Christian doctrines about women's mental and spiritual weakness and heightened carnality, had already been made half a century earlier by the Dominican Johannes Nider.¹³³

Nider is a particularly interesting source, not only because he was the earliest ecclesiastical authority to state explicitly that witchcraft was an especially feminine crime,¹³⁴ but also because he conveys something of the surprise that the notion of women performing powerful acts of sorcery might still have carried for authorities in the early fifteenth century. In the dialogue of the *Formicarius* Nider presented many examples of female witches (along with numerous male witches, it must be noted). Finally, after his discussion of a recent and notorious case of a woman whom he describes as having been burned for witchcraft, one Joan of Arc,¹³⁵ his pupil interrupted, declaring with some surprise that he “cannot wonder enough how the fragile sex should dare to rush into such presumptions.” To this Nider answered wryly, “Among simple ones like yourself these things are wonders, but in the eyes of prudent men they are not rare.”¹³⁶ He then went on to give several explanations for why women were more inclined to witchcraft than were men, all focusing on women's inferior physical, mental, and moral capacity.

The reality of the matter, however, was that only in Nider's day were “prudent

¹³⁰ Figures from Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials* (as above, n. 128).

¹³¹ Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, pp. 133–34.

¹³² *Malleus maleficarum* 1.6, in *Nachdruck des Erstdruckes von 1487 mit Bulle und Approbatio*, ed. Günter Jerouschek (Hildesheim, 1992), fols. 20r–23v.

¹³³ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.8 (Colvener, pp. 388–90); and *Preceptorium* 1.11.bb.

¹³⁴ As noted by Burghartz, “Hexenverfolgung,” p. 153. Burghartz does not provide any discussion of Nider, however, instead moving directly to the *Malleus maleficarum*.

¹³⁵ In fact, charges of witchcraft did not figure in Joan's final conviction. See Russell, *Witchcraft*, pp. 261–62.

¹³⁶ Nider, *Formicarius* 5.8 (Colvener, p. 388).

men” beginning to convince themselves that simple women were indeed capable of the terrible crimes entailed in witchcraft. Learned necromancy required literacy and training unavailable to the vast majority of women (as, indeed, to most men). Moreover, necromancy was a clearly masculine act entailing intelligence and force of will. Witchcraft, on the other hand, while allowing even greater access to demonic power than most necromancers commanded, was based on submission and subservience to Satan—characteristically female qualities. The number of women brought to trial for sorcery seems to have been rising in the late Middle Ages, even before the idea of witchcraft coalesced. Doubtless this was due to the rising number of trials in general and the predominance of women in the “popular” tradition of common sorcery. Clerical authorities were soon able to harmonize this fact with their own understanding of how such magic operated, however, as can be seen taking place in the writings of Johannes Nider. Having already determined that the power of witches derived not from their own knowledge and skill but from their complete submission to the devil, authorities from Nider to Heinrich Institoris, author of the *Malleus*, then linked witchcraft to feminine spiritual weakness, and particularly to female susceptibility to the carnal temptations of the devil—a dismal reminder, perhaps, that communication and cooperation between “dominating” elites and “oppressed” masses are not always hallmarks of progress.

The rise of witchcraft as a whole in western Europe was due not just to elite paranoia or popular superstition; it stemmed from an unwitting collaboration among people at every level of medieval society, and it drew on numerous aspects of late-medieval culture. For a phenomenon so complex and multifaceted in its origin, no one cause or single explanation can fully suffice.¹³⁷ Insofar as many aspects of witchcraft were deeply indebted to medieval notions of magic, however, changing perceptions of and attitudes toward magic clearly helped to shape the emerging idea of witchcraft in many important ways. By exploring these changes and their consequences, I have sought to shed some new light on the intellectual foundations upon which the concept of witchcraft rested and on the intellectual developments that helped to shape that later idea. If the focus here has been primarily on elite, clerical conceptions of magic and witchcraft, that is not to dismiss the contribution made to these developing notions by other groups within medieval society. As I have stressed throughout, elite ideas developed largely because of an unwitting conflation of the elite’s own understanding of how magic functioned and more common magical beliefs and concerns. Yet clearly, in this merger of magical systems, it was the elite who, by virtue of their legal, religious, and intellectual authority, exercised far more direct control over how new ideas ultimately emerged and what consequences those ideas would carry.¹³⁸

Christian condemnation of magic as being of the devil stretched back to the earliest church fathers, yet for much of the Middle Ages, ecclesiastical authorities were little concerned with magic. The devil and his demons were, of course, at

¹³⁷ See Robin Briggs, “‘Many Reasons Why’: Witchcraft and the Problem of Multiple Explanation,” in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, ed. Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester, and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), pp. 46–63.

¹³⁸ Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, pp. 28–29.

work in the world, but their powers seemed limited, in the main, to temptation, trickery, and deception. For many centuries the church essentially dismissed much common magic as simple error, and even well into the 1200s many manifestations of demonic power were in fact seen as confirming, rather than threatening, the supremacy of divine power and the authority of the church in the world.¹³⁹ Yet times were changing. By the beginning of the fourteenth century the West had rediscovered complex learned systems of magic, and concern over the efficacy of demonic power was growing among the educated, clerical elite, some of whom themselves engaged in necromancy. Such clerical magicians typically asserted that they commanded demons just as Christ had done, but the concern spread among other authorities that such legitimate control was either not present or, darker still, could never truly be achieved over demons.¹⁴⁰ As the church began to move to root out and destroy such necromantic magic, however, it naturally more often uncovered far less sophisticated common magical practices. Convinced that all magic must operate according to principles with which they were already familiar, clerical authorities forced these two systems of magic together, or more accurately, simply refused to recognize them as two separate systems. This process culminated in the development of the idea of witchcraft, a new system that allowed most elements of common magic to exist within a framework of intense diabolism that fit the elite's necromantic concerns and convictions.¹⁴¹

In a sense, then, the idea of sorcery came full circle through the Middle Ages. In the late-antique and early-medieval periods, as Christianity imposed itself on classical and pagan systems of magic, ecclesiastical authorities emphasized the demonic nature of most magic, and thus condemned most non-Christian ritual. This emphasis on the power of the demon, however, served to reduce the culpability of the human magician. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the learned necromancer emerged as a powerful figure, reclaiming much of the human agency in magic, and therefore also much human culpability, through his deliberate invocations of demons. Finally, in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, as sorcery was transformed into witchcraft, so the common sorcerer, typically poor, uneducated, and often a woman, became the humble yet terrible witch. She, too, was seen mainly as a tool of demons and of the devil, yet sadly, she had lost the freedom from culpability that common sorcerers had enjoyed in an earlier age. Instead she bore the full stigma of the necromancer, guilty of a deliberate and conscious association with demons. Interestingly, the necromancer

¹³⁹ Barbara Newman, "Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century," *Speculum* 73 (1998), 733–70, presents a fascinating study of the various, mostly positive, religious functions performed by possessed people, including "demon preachers" and even "demon saints." She notes in conclusion: "*Obsessae* and *obsessi* flamboyantly dramatized the eternal warfare between God and Satan, making the devil's assaults on humanity visible, audible, and tangible. But more often than not, they also provided reassuring proof that God was winning, whether by their eventual exorcism or their compulsory witness to the truth" (p. 768).

¹⁴⁰ Recall Nicholas Eymeric's concerns about the difficulties involved in compelling a demon to perform some task in the absence of adoration or veneration (see above, p. 974).

¹⁴¹ Rationalizing the strange and unexplainable had long been a chief concern of medieval thinkers. See Bynum, "Miracles and Marvels" (as above, n. 20).

largely avoided the stigma of the witch. Although the transformation of sorcery into witchcraft was driven by the conflation of elite and common magical traditions, after the establishment of witchcraft in the European consciousness, these two types of magic again diverged. The learned Renaissance magus of the early modern period was often held suspect in the minds of authorities, but rarely was he accused of the full horrors entailed in witchcraft.¹⁴²

By the later fifteenth century, and certainly by the time the great hunts began in the sixteenth century, the figure of the witch had become firmly established and was widely understood by elite authorities (and increasingly by people from all levels of European society) as being quite distinct from mere magicians or even demonic sorcerers. That this distinction quickly became so profound should not, however, obscure the fact that the idea of witchcraft developed at a specific time and for specific reasons, primarily out of earlier ideas of sorcery. Magic may at times appear to be a perennial aspect of premodern cultures, but magic, too, has its history, its story of change over time. And insofar as magic in all its forms was such a pervasive aspect of premodern culture, even seemingly slight or subtle changes in ideas of how magic worked or who could work magic produced effects of wide importance. Changing notions of how magic operated, and changing concerns about what magical operations might or must entail, drove the transformation of sorcery into witchcraft. The effects of that change marked Europe for centuries to come.

¹⁴² Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, pp. 10–11.

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